

# Valuing Written Accents:

Non-native Students Talk about  
Identity, Academic Writing, and  
Meeting Teachers' Expectations

*Second Edition*



A George Mason publication on Diversity from  
the Diversity Research Group, the University Writing Center,  
and the Offices of University Life

VALUING WRITTEN ACCENTS:  
NON-NATIVE STUDENTS TALK ABOUT IDENTITY,  
ACADEMIC WRITING, AND MEETING TEACHERS'  
EXPECTATIONS

Issue II  
*Second Edition*  
*Diversity at Mason series*

Authored by:

Dr. Terry Myers Zawacki  
Eiman Hajabbasi  
Anna Habib  
Alex Antram  
Alokparna Das

With special thanks to the 26 informants who participated in  
this research.

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From the Diversity Research Group and  
the Offices of University Life  
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## CONTENTS

|  |     |
|--|-----|
| Foreword   | iii |
| Chapter 1:   |     |
| Introduction   | 1   |
| Student Profile: Kanishka  | 7   |
| Chapter 2:   |     |
| Methods, Texts, and Contexts   | 9   |
| Student Profile: Karimatu  | 17  |
| Chapter 3:   |     |
| Global Englishes, Language Aesthetics, and<br>Perceptions of the Self as Scholar | 19  |
| Student Profile: Ayesha  | 31  |
| Chapter 4:   |     |
| Writing Processes, Readers' Expectations,<br>and Grammar Anxiety                 | 33  |
| Student Profile: Diana   | 47  |
| Chapter 5:   |     |
| What the Stories Teach Us: Implications<br>and Next Steps                        | 49  |
| Suggested Readings   | 57  |
| Works Cited and Consulted  | 59  |

## PREFACE

WE ARE PROUD TO REPORT that the first edition of this publication was extremely well-received by George Mason University faculty and programs, as well as by those at other universities who heard about this research at our conference presentations and requested copies. Demand for this publication resulted in a second printing. The second edition is possible thanks to the generosity of the English Language Institute (ELI).

Since the publication of the first edition, we have continued our research on multilingual writers in the American academy by focusing on faculty perspectives. We are in the process of interviewing faculty at George Mason University to learn from their experiences working with the diverse student population at GMU. We also have a new website presenting the findings of the research described in this monograph. The purpose of the website is to share the student voices gathered in this research and to raise awareness among faculty, administrators, researchers, and students about the challenges facing multilingual students. Our website features profiles of students who participated in the research, a community exchange page linking users to our blog, an outline of our research process, details of our findings, and a resource library.

We hope you will visit our website:

<http://writtenaccents.gmu.edu/>

## FOREWORD

THE DIVERSITY RESEARCH GROUP consists of administrators, staff, and faculty who have been meeting once a semester since Spring 2004. It includes participants from Institutional Assessment, Institutional Research, a variety of offices in University Life, the Student Media Group, the Writing Center, and faculty from Anthropology, Education, English, Public and International Affairs, and Sociology. The group has come together not out of any formal directive but from a shared interest in the topic.

And the topic? Each meeting begins with the same reminder. George Mason is a highly diverse institution, and it is diverse in unusual ways. It is also marked by remarkable levels of collaboration across instructional, student affairs, and institutional support sectors. What better location from which to consider the impact of diversity on higher education? Over the years, members of the group have conducted focus group sessions with students, taken new approaches to institutional data, offered panels and workshops at professional meetings, published professional papers, investigated the prospects of collaborative research with other universities, shared information with one another, and – thanks to support from the Offices of University Life – embarked on three pilot projects, two of which have been the focus of a new *Diversity at Mason* series published by University Life.

The first of those efforts culminated in a volume of student reports on their experiences of diversity at Mason, organized by anthropology professor David Haines. That volume—*Student Reflections*—appeared in Summer 2006.

The second effort—research on how non-native writers adapt to the U.S. academy—is represented in this volume: *Written Accents: Non-native Students Talk about Identity, Academic Writing, and Meeting Teachers' Expectations*, authored by a writing center research team comprised of director Terry Zawacki, assistant director Anna Habib, both of whom are also English faculty members, and Eiman Hajabbasi, Alex Antram, and Alokparna Das, tutors and ESL special-

ists. Drawing on interviews with a diverse range of Mason students and staff, this research explores the experiences of our non-native students as writers in our classrooms and in their home countries. The authors describe an enculturation process that is both exciting and poignant – exciting for the comparison of cultures and ways of thinking, poignant for the difficulty that sometimes accompanies bridging those differences.

Thus, like the first volume in the *Diversity at Mason* series, this research moves us toward a richer understanding of all the ways that diversity plays out in higher education in general, and at George Mason in particular. I hope that you find it interesting.

Karen Rosenblum  
Department of Sociology and Anthropology  
Convener, Diversity Research Group

## CHAPTER ONE

### INTRODUCTION

Interviewer: *What would you say your weaknesses are in writing in English?*

Ayesha (Pakistan): *I am really short of words. I would really love to learn nice words. Because I do have ideas, and I do want to put something down, but I am short of words.*

Interviewer: *What challenges have you faced in writing in English?*

Yoon (S. Korea): *...In America, you guys put the thesis sentence at the beginning of the paper and I write totally different style of the paper and the professor say, "Where are you from? How you get into the college?"*

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**G**EORGE MASON UNIVERSITY IS, by some estimates, the most diverse institution in the country, and so it is not surprising that at the University Writing Center we are privileged to work with students from a wide array of cultural and linguistic backgrounds. These students speak and write over fifty-five different languages and represent over 50% of the total number of students we tutor each year. In an effort to better understand our non-native students' identities as writers and rhetors in the academy, our research team, comprised of five writing center colleagues, embarked on a multi-year, HSRB-approved research project, the results of which we present in this issue of the series *Diversity at Mason*.

The findings we present here are framed by the scholarship on language acquisition, ESL pedagogy, and ethnographic theory. They include non-native students' responses to interview questions about learning to write in their native languages and in English, the differences they perceive between writing in both, where they have most felt the cultural disconnections, and how they have learned to adapt to the expectations of their teachers here. We interviewed twenty-six writers, some of whom we knew from the writing center and others we contacted through various international student organizations and the English Language Institute. As we interviewed the students and then discussed and coded the interview transcripts, we were keenly aware of the dangers of generalizing differences cross-culturally, especially when we had captured only a small part of our interviewees' writing



experiences. During the process of conducting and coding interviews, three members of our research team who are themselves multi-lingual also discovered aspects of their identities as writers and academics. Though we did not count them among our informants, we consider these co-researchers to be “informed informants,” as their stories led to greater awareness for all of us of the dynamic processes of writing and identity formation.

“The way you write,” *Sandarshi*, another “informed” informant (as I’ll explain later), told us, “is not necessarily the language you learn but the values and beliefs and the cultural norms that influence the patterns of thinking that then influence the writing. ...so there are lots of things that are hidden.” These complex “hidden” things are what make it difficult to organize into separate categories the many overlapping themes we identified in the interview transcripts and even more difficult to draw conclusions based on these themes and categories. In presenting our research to readers, then, we recognize that this is only one version of the many stories the interview data could tell.

Our research was inspired by the widely praised DVD “Writing Across Borders,” which features eight non-native students talking about expectations for writing in their native countries compared to those they encountered in their studies at Oregon State University, where the video was produced. I had seen an early draft of the video at the 2004 Writing Across the Curriculum conference and came back determined to follow up on the Oregon project by collecting stories from an even larger and more diverse range of non-native Mason students to be presented in a web-based format, making the students’ stories accessible to a much wider audience. With my former WAC program assistant, I wrote up a research plan, received IRB approval for interviews, and, subsequently, was awarded funding from University Life to support the project. This funding allowed our current research team to thank the interview informants for their time with a Barnes and Noble gift certificate, a small token compared to the wealth of information they gave us. While the website we are in the process of developing will allow our informants’ voices to be heard as well as read, in this issue we are limited by the print format, so we have kept our analysis (our voices) brief and have chosen, for the most part, to quote rather than paraphrase our informants’ responses. We’ve also included, as interleaves, short profiles of four different informants based on excerpts from their interviews.

In the first chapter, we introduce our informants and the widely diverse linguistic, cultural, and disciplinary backgrounds from which they come. Here, however, I want to mention three colleagues we count among the informants but who also helped us pilot our interview questions: *Ying Zhou*, Associate Director; Institutional Assessment; *Sandarshi Gunawardena*, Assistant Director, International Programs and Services; and *Cheryl Choy*, Associate Director, Center for Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation. We thank these colleagues not only for responding to the questions but also for explaining which questions were vague or confusing and suggesting revisions and additional questions.

For the time they spent talking to us about best practices for teaching ESL composition, we also want to thank English department instructor *Sara King*, who teaches English 100: Composition for Non-Native Students, and *Laurie Miller*, an instructor in the English Language Institute. Their contributions, while not included here, will inform a section of the website on recommended best practices for working with non-native writers.

Since the inception of the project almost three years ago, two of the initial team members have cycled off the project, Megan Kelly and Marjorie Roberts. As the principal investigator, I've guided the project and invited new members to join, each of whom brings a unique perspective to the research, enriching and informing our analysis. The team now consists of the following members:

*Dr. Terry Myers Zawacki* is English faculty and director of the University Writing Center and the Writing Across the Curriculum program. Terry has a background in composition and qualitative methods, and regularly teaches English 311: Writing Ethnography. For her co-authored book *Engaged Writers and Dynamic Disciplines: Research on the Academic Writing Life*, she and Chris Thaiss drew on data from interviews, focus groups, and surveys collected from faculty and students across disciplines.

*Eiman Hajabbasi*, an ESL specialist in the Writing Center, holds a B.A. in International Studies and an M.A. in Linguistics. She is fluent in English, Farsi, and French. In addition, she teaches English for Academic Purposes as an adjunct at The George Washington University. She's a contributing writer for *The Book of Rule*, an ency-

clopedic account of how the countries of the world are governed. As the person who's been on the project the longest, Eiman has been responsible for organizing interviews and corresponding with the IRB on amendments to the study design and human consent forms.

*Anna Habib* is term faculty in English and the assistant director of the Writing Center. She holds an MFA in Creative Nonfiction and is currently working on a nonfiction book *A Block from Bliss Street* about growing up as a child of the Lebanese civil war. In addition to English, she is fluent in French, Arabic, and Greek.

*Alex Antram* is graduating from Mason with a double major in anthropology and religious studies. She is trained in ethnographic methodology, having participated in an intensive field school in Tonga and an internship as an ethnographer for the National Park Service. She has studied anthropology abroad at Oxford University and serves on the executive committee of the Washington Association of Professional Anthropologists.

*Alokparna (Alo) Das*, an ESL specialist in the Writing Center and a graduate student in Linguistics, has been living in the U.S. for the past nine years. She is fluent in Hindi/Urdu, Bengali, and English. Before coming to the U.S., she earned a master's degree in English literature from Delhi University and was a journalist and script writer for English documentary films in India.

Over the past two semesters, our team has met nearly every week to work on this project; with new interviews being conducted and transcribed on an ongoing basis, we found we needed to maintain a regular schedule of meetings to keep up. All of us participated in coding, discussing, and analyzing the data. Also present at most meetings was Ryan Call, my graduate research assistant, who typed as we talked, giving us an informal transcript of our discussion that we subsequently mined for ideas and insights. While all of us were active participants in all phases of the data analysis process, in the interest of time we divided up the writing tasks for this publication, as I indicate in the chapter overview below.

—Terry Zawacki

## CHAPTER OVERVIEW:

IN CHAPTER TWO, *Alex Antram* describes our study, introduces our informants, and reviews briefly some of the most relevant literature to our project on English and non-native writers. She also discusses the difficulties we faced in trying to determine the cultural and linguistic categories into which our highly diverse group of informants might fit.

As a way to let readers hear some of our informants' voices more fully we have included four short profiles between each of the chapters. *Eiman Hajabbasi* compiled these excerpts from interviews with Kanishka, Sri Lanka; Karimatu, Nigeria; Ayesha, Pakistan; and Diana, Colombia. Besides representing a cross section of our informants, these students were among our most reflective when talking about their writing processes here and in their native countries. Excerpting these informants' voices proved to be challenging, as we've taken them out of the give-and-take context of the interview to present aspects of their stories most telling, in our view, of important cultural differences. And, while we tried to retain their written "accents," we've lightly edited their spoken words for ease of reading, as we have throughout this report.

IN CHAPTER THREE, we present our findings on the ways our informants have learned to write for school, both here and in their native countries. *Alokparna Das* begins with a discussion of the complexity of analyzing the writing experiences of students who come from post colonial countries and the influence of global Englishes on how English is written across cultures; in her section, she includes reflections on her own schooling experiences in Delhi, India. In a second section, *Anna Habib* weaves her own experiences as a non-native writer into her presentation of how our informants learned the appropriate writerly stances and prose styles expected of academic writers both here and in their home cultures.

IN CHAPTER FOUR, continuing with our findings, we describe the attitudes about writing and writing practices our informants acquired in their native countries and how they have learned to write for the academic audiences they are now encountering, including the "straight-forward" prose conventions they define as "good" writing and their

anxiety about their own ability to write well in English. *Terry Zawacki* and *Eiman Hajabbasi* co-authored this chapter.

IN CHAPTER FIVE, we conclude with a discussion of the implications of our research for writing center tutors and teachers across the disciplines, authored by *Anna Habib*.

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In the first issue of the *Diversity at Mason* series for which editor David Haines invited students to reflect on what diversity meant to them, Tonka Dobрева, one of our informants and also a former writing center tutor, wrote: “Diversity is not an end in itself, but a means to an end. I have heard many people use the phrase ‘celebrate diversity.’ It has been a logo and a title for numerous events. ... Diversity brings along challenges that need to be negotiated and constantly worked on. Merely being diverse and celebrating this fact is not enough. We need to focus on the effort to bargain with diversity.”

In a sense that’s what we’re attempting to do in this study, recognizing and calling attention to the challenges that diversity brings to writers and teachers of writing in the academy. We hope that by presenting these diverse students’ experiences, we can begin the process of negotiation around what is good writing and what is good-enough writing as our non-native students struggle to make their ideas and arguments heard in the U.S. academy.

Good writing, Tonka told us, is when you have your ideas and research but you also have your own written accent. “When you hear my accent, you know where I come from,” she explained. “Well, I want my writing to be reflected in that way too.” In this issue, we ask readers to value the written accents along with the richly diverse perspectives our non-native students bring to the academy.

## **Kanishka**

Native country – Sri Lanka

Languages – Sinhalese and English

Graduate student (PhD) – Public Policy

*How did you have to adjust to academic writing in the U.S.?*

One thing I realized in my academic writing was that I had to really keep my sentences short for one thing. And, as I said, not use any colorful words, you know just take in the least possible number of words and very directly and very simple words too. For me, I have a problem because I think the language has so much of richness, which is lost in doing that. But for my academic purposes I don't mind doing that. But that is an adjustment I had to do when I came here.

*What surprised you about writing for the American academy?*

By the time I came here [GMU] I was okay with my writing. When I was first at [another U.S. institution] that is where I had my initial friction between the cultures and I was told over and over again you have to cut down, clean up your paragraphs. To me I was very offended because I came with a lot of confidence behind me and suddenly I find that it's totally different. But it didn't take me long to catch up though I realized it was totally different and any nice language I use is wasted. No one is going to look at it in that way.

*On differing approaches to aesthetics of language:*

I should say here it is a more functional language, and practical and I think professional too in the current status quo, because you know that is what people are looking for ... because where you are demonstrating the beauty of the language is pretty much different from where you try to convey a quick message. They would be two different arenas totally, so maybe if you are doing something in an office, maybe you shouldn't use too much beautiful language, that doesn't make sense. Just tell me what you are telling me and that makes sense. What is your point? That is the thing--the time restrictions and the deadlines and the bottom lines.

*On the post-colonial legacy in Sri Lanka:*

English is identified, as you know, as a symbol of success, and so people try to have some kind of incentive to learn English, and there is incentive among parents who teach their kids English because that is really seen as a sign of success and this is really right too when you step out...there is a high correlation between people who do well and their fluency in English.

Our whole thinking is structured that way and that is why people keep using English at home between friends, in the offices, in the school, so people do that. I think this is coming from the class structure because when we were a colony, all the goodies were given to the people who were close with them and to build that you have to know how to speak in English. During that time, when we were a colony, people who could speak English and were close with them were the winners in the society. In 1948 we got our independence, but this has still flown in the current situation too, and the system is still structured that way. The people who could speak English have an advantage, and that makes sense because you have companies who are dealing with other international companies would rather have someone who can communicate with others and speak not only in Sinhalese.

*Do you feel that there is a loss of culture because of this sort of English presence?*

Yes and no actually. I guess the language, the kind of English we speak in Sri Lanka, is different from the English we speak over here. It is very different. I mean we have our own ways of speaking English, which is really funny because ... like typical thing is we use “no” at the end of sentences, that kind of thing, which people have acquired and it is very ingrained in how people speak.

## CHAPTER TWO

### METHODS, TEXTS, AND CONTEXTS

#### Part I. Methods

OUR RESEARCH ATTEMPTS TO DISCOVER how non-native students invent the American university as they learn to write academic English for a diverse range of courses, teachers, and degree programs. What ways of thinking and writing do they bring with them? What has proven most difficult for them as they translate across both home and school cultures?

#### *A Diversity of Labels*

The research into contrasting rhetorics has taken into account the diversity of learner profiles struggling with academic English. This research argues that instructors should consider the difficulties immigrants, U.S. residents born abroad, indigenous language minorities, first generation, and English speaking students without much exposure to standard academic discourse have transitioning into the academy. Some common labels used in discussions of contrastive rhetoric theory and research include: EFL (English as a foreign language), ESL (English as a second language), L1 (First Language), L2 (Second Language), NL (Native Language), NNS (Non Native Speaker of English), NNW (Non Native Writer of English).

For the most part, we refer to students as non-native writers, meaning those reared in writing outside of the United States, noting that English is often a first language for these students. This takes into account speakers of Post-Colonial Englishes, such as our informants from India, Nigeria, Sri Lanka, and others. Please also note that, although we often use the popular expression “American academy,” we are referring to the U.S. educational system, not speaking of an inclusive academy across the Americas.

#### *Our Research Process*

We recognize that we are attempting a lot here—asking informants to relate their experiences as academic writers across national, cultural, linguistic boundaries. Considering the extent of this work, our research process has evolved constantly throughout the past year and a half of



data collection.

Recognizing the possible sensitivity of our informants' responses, we applied for Human Subjects Review Board approval to conduct research. The university deemed our research ethical, posing minimal emotional risk to our informants. Each member of our team was certified in social/behavioral research after taking the CITI online modules and quizzes.<sup>1</sup>

Even while conceptualizing this project, we realized how challenging it would be to ask students to verbalize their often unconscious writing processes. It is difficult to separate influences, to decipher what may be culturally versus individually determined, to ask informants to recall the earliest stages of their writing careers, which usually are as early as their language acquisition.

As we developed our interview questions, we tested them with Sandarshi, Ying, and Cheryl, all non-native speakers working in professional capacities at the university. We asked them to answer each question, comment on any that were unclear, and reflect on questions that seemed to call for complex answers. The director of the "Writing Across Borders" DVD, Wayne Robertson, also helped us develop questions that allowed for more narrative responses.

Drawing from ethnographic theory, we used a method popular in the social sciences known as grounded analysis to review the interviews. We coded the data, i.e. examined the transcripts for emerging themes, individually and together as a group.

There are inherent problems that come with coding and analyzing informant transcripts, one of these being that it is difficult to bracket preconceived notions while one is trying to produce an objective analysis. The themes that emerge from the data, in other words, are always shaped by existing preconceptions and experiences. Reflecting as a group was invaluable to the development of our research process, and helped keep our analysis balanced, especially considering the diverse experiences of our team itself.

Along with Sandarshi, Ying, and Cheryl—and, to a certain extent Tonka, who was trained as a writing center tutor—we think of three of our team members as informed informants. Anna raised in Lebanon and Cyprus, speaking Arabic and French, Alo being trilingual (Hindi, Bengali, English) and having earned advanced degrees in India, and

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1 We are certified through the CITI Program's Course in the Protection of Human Research Subjects). Visit [www.citiprogram.org/](http://www.citiprogram.org/).

Eiman as a first-generation American raised bilingually and immersed in Iranian culture at home. They are familiar with these language traditions, and as linguists and composition instructors, also have the background to discuss contrastive rhetoric.

### *Informants*

In selecting informants, we used George Mason and our writing center demographics as a guide. Alo developed a language tree to see if we covered our branches. We did not actively seek out students of western European backgrounds, because of the low ratio of these students in the Mason community and the similarities in rhetoric between the American academy and their own linguistic traditions. In speaking with several informants of European upbringing (namely, France, Spain, and Greece), our suspicions of similarities were confirmed in that their writing practices seemed to stem from the Western rhetorical tradition.

We questioned who would be the best informants, grad students or undergrads. Because writing processes may be unconscious, the differences between cultural expectations of writing may be invisible to the informant. As *Sri* from *India* said, “It’s my own language, so I can’t really identify a [particular] aspect of it.” They may not be used to thinking about or reflecting on their language and writing practices. In seeking undergraduates who are newly transplanted, we benefited from a close proximity to writing in their native culture; whereas, graduate students or professionals may be years separated from higher education in their native country, but more apt to have the academic language to reflect on their writing processes. Informants with plans to return to their home country may have had less commitment to understanding more nuanced differences in writing. Another variable we had to consider was who actually showed up for the interview to which they had committed.

We conducted one focus group, which was not as useful to our research as we had hoped as the students in this introductory composition course were from such mixed backgrounds and had a variety of motives for being in the class. In the focus group, as well as with a number of our individual informants, we found it difficult to determine the extent to which their responses were influenced by their enrollment in a composition class for non-native writers during the time we interviewed them.

### *Framing Interviews*

One issue we encountered during interviews was the Hawthorne Effect, the phenomenon that, when people are observed in a study, their behavior temporarily changes. In our case, we were concerned we were anticipating answers and framing interview questions in such a way as to encourage certain responses. Similarly, in cases where students may not have the language or training to discuss a process, we questioned whether we were leading the conversation, and if they were giving us a response they thought we'd like to hear.

In one line of questioning, we asked *Luis*, a student from Chile, to speak about the characteristics of his language. Anna, attempting to better explain the question, said, "For example, I speak Arabic and in Arabic everything is over-exaggerated and very flowery...there is a difference in the way that the language feels." Luis subsequently picked up on Anna's terminology in describing his Spanish friend's approach to writing a few moments later: "Ignacio tries to put flowers and things; he is really a good student. I am just more simple." Here we obviously gave the informant an expression to describe writing.

In one case in particular we felt the Hawthorne Effect to be in full force, as it seemed a student was perhaps repeating generalizations he has heard about writing in Spanish. *Luis* from *Peru* exaggerated the point of Spanish being romantic so much that we felt he may be recalling things that he had heard, but perhaps not experienced. We need to consider that students may be drawing on generalizations projected on them by other research, playing off simple reductionism.

We, of course, had to consider Robert B. Kaplan's 1966 article that spurred the dialogue on contrastive rhetoric<sup>2</sup>. Though good to think with, and certainly informative for our research, Kaplan's models are reductive. And although a student may not be aware of Kaplan's theory, they may have encountered the essentializing of various stereotypes. While interviewing, we kept in mind Sandarshi's advice:

I think it's hard to do that [to] any given culture. I think by saying Middle Eastern people write in circles or English write straight through...those are, I think, American stereotypes or Western stereotypes. It's

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2 See literature review.

more the things you believe—values and judgment. There are basic things which are universally common like [a] grammar [and] structure, but beyond that, it's the norms and the way you think.

We are not reducing thinkers into neat categories, but rather trying to find some common ground in addressing the diverse needs of writers in internationalized institutions. We are still learning to be suspicious of exchanges that seem scripted, learning to evaluate our interactions with informants. Some questions we continue to consider: How do these students perceive our research? Is there a fear of being “othered,” a desire to assimilate? Do responses have a feeling of resistance? Does our line of questioning lead informants to think we are expecting their culture to be exceedingly different, inferior, or exotic? How do they feel American culture represents them?

Our triangulation process continues to bring up such valuable questions which need to be considered as this project is continued and codified. We continue to meet as a group to analyze the transcripts, including our etic, outside, perspective and the emic voices, our informants' perception of the writing process.

### *Variables and Generalizations*

We are aware this research has limitations, and we acknowledge the unpredictables while analyzing data. Variables include maturity, cognition, discipline, levels of awareness about language, number of years in the US, perceptions of how able they were as writers in their native language and in English, if they plan to return to their home country or continue studies and employment here, and more. As mentioned, we used the writing center clientele as a guide for recruiting informants, and realize we don't have representatives from all, or even most, language groups and ethnicities.

Despite the variables, we do attempt to make generalizations, concerning language groups, cultures, disciplines. We are not intending for an informant to represent an entire ethnic category, just that this informant may be explaining a way that someone from this background thinks about academic writing. As we continue to collect data, we will draw more connections. Generalizations are dangerous,

but we need to make inferences from our findings; otherwise, what's the point? We just need to recognize the limitations, and the value, of our methods.

## Part II. Literature Review

THERE IS NOT ROOM HERE to mention all of the scholars who have contributed to the fields related to our research, so this section will focus on the theory of contrastive rhetoric and what scholars have said either in support of or opposition to the theory.

The concept of contrastive rhetoric entered the academic scene in 1966 with the applied linguist Robert B. Kaplan's work "Cultural Thought Patterns in Intercultural Education." In this seminal publication, Kaplan suggested learner models for the ways in which individuals from different cultures approach writing, a social construct. Kaplan proposed that "each language and each culture has a paragraph order unique to itself, and that part of the learning of a particular language is the mastery of its logical system" (14). He said, for example, that English is linear while Asian thinking, and therefore writing, moves in a spiral pattern. Kaplan delineated these categories in an effort to help non-native English speakers learn how to write acceptable academic English. Though an interesting take on learning styles, and an early recognition of socio-cultural influences on writing style, Kaplan's models were reductive and provided a prescriptive approach to writing instruction. The 1970s saw little development in the field of contrastive rhetoric, and by the 1990s, scholars had abandoned "text oriented research for product oriented instruction" (Leki 124).<sup>3</sup> In 1996, Kaplan's early models were formally rejected by TESOL (Teachers of English to Speakers of Other Languages), as that year's conference attendees agreed that no language or culture can be reduced to one or two diagrammatic structures (Scollon).

Contrastive rhetoric as a theory has evolved in composition discourse for forty years, with emphasis now resting on the practical application of cultural contexts in instructing non-native learners and assessing their writing (Connor). The recent movement into the critical application of the theory affirms pluralist approaches to writing in the American academy, pressing instructors to recognize the diversity of

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3 See also Grabe and Kaplan.

rhetoric and its relationship to identity politics (Kubota and Lehner). Students and their written expression are the products and creators of a complex web of culture, power, and rhetoric.<sup>4</sup> Scholars such as John Hinds and Ann Raimés propose that those performing research into contrastive rhetoric must also focus on the readers for whom the text is written, and in turn, scholars John Swales and Ann Johns, in particular, argue that this means we must also look at disciplinary conventions and expectations. The interactions between culture and the writer's discipline need to be considered as academic English evolves to suit the needs of an increasing diversity of students.

Many EFL specialists and composition researchers are proposing that the academy, instead of preserving rigid academic English, should initiate a transformation that incorporates diversity and allows for alternative discourses in the classroom.<sup>5</sup> They are pressing a more accepting approach to alternative rhetoric, suggesting there is room for dialects outside of the privileged variety of written English, in the classroom. As compositionist Helen Fox writes,

the dominant communication style and world view of the US university, variously known as “academic argument,” “analytical writing,” “critical thinking,” or just plain “good writing” is based on assumptions and habits of mind that are derived from western—or more specifically US—culture, and that this way of thinking and communicating is considered the most sophisticated, intelligent, and efficient by only a fraction of the world's peoples (xxi).

ESL specialist Amy Tucker writes about the need to pluralize English and argues for increasing diversity in composition writing. She suggests the goal of such research isn't simply to better assimilate diverse voices, but also to expand the academic process of interpretation and internationalize the canon of American academic English (64).

At the forefront of this hybrid discourse movement currently is University of New Hampshire composition professor Paul Kei

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4 See Schmid. Research by sociologists and anthropologists are being considered along with composition studies for this project.

5 See Matsuda, Tucker, Behling, Canagarajah, Fox, Lan, for example.

Matsuda, who has stated that the present focus of composition studies should be on cross-cultural communication and merging the varieties of English into college writing to support multiculturalism in the classroom (2006). He joins with professor of Post-Colonial literature and native Sri Lankan Suresh Canagarajah, who suggests that both the reader and writer need to be more aware of each other's dialects because even though English is the *lingua-franca* of the world, it is the deep structure of English that is common, and patterns of organization in writing differ. Laura Behling argues that not only can language on the presentation level become pluralized, but multicultural writing can serve to foster an informed and compassionate view of different discourses. Fox agrees with this in *Listening to the World*:

Talking about “analysis” with world majority students always involves talking about cultural expectations... It is more than just a set of writing and thinking techniques—it is a voice, a stance, a relationship with texts and authorities that is taught, both consciously and unconsciously, by family members, friends, teachers, the media, even this history of one's country (125).

Keeping in mind the factors that influence student writing, Fox urges those who are proponents of the dominant discourse be aware of the cultural expectations, assumptions, and histories they bring to the table when reviewing student writing on the basis of style. In recognizing biases on both the student and instructor sides, academics may begin to appreciate alternative discourse while bracketing their own cultural selves. Those in favor of transforming academic writing to include international styles suggest methods akin to those cultural anthropologists employ when performing ethnography: Open-minded observation and listening, and awareness of each parties' cultural selves. Students may be more apt to adapt their style if they feel their way of critical thinking and writing is being understood and appreciated by instructors, and the academy in turn may broaden its perception of the written standard and break away from monolingual and uncultural approaches to teaching.



## **Karimatu**

Native country – Nigeria

Languages – Hausa and English

Undergraduate – Health Systems Management

*How is writing in English different than writing in Hausa?*

Writing in English is more difficult because you have to translate it in your brain. I mean you have to observe it and then translate it. But in Hausa as you put your pen those ideas start coming. It is much easier to write in my language, in Hausa.

*On different approaches to organization:*

When you are writing an essay you don't go following some certain rules or regulations whereby you have to have introduction, thesis, conclusion, body. In Hausa you don't have to do all that. What is more important is the ideas that you are putting on the paper, that is what is more important than the organizations. There is less emphasis on organization. You don't have to brainstorm and arrange your ideas. You don't have to do that.

*On the importance of readers' conceptions of what constitutes good writing:*

My writing in Hausa is good, but my writing in English I would say is very bad. I have my ideas, but when it comes to organizing them, I don't have a strong background in doing that, due to the two languages. If the reader has an English background he might say this is not organized, but if it is a Hausa reader, then this is what is expected.



*How do you contrast the education system in the U.S. with that of Nigeria?*

If I know how to write, American system of education is very easy. In the British system, you have to cram and memorize definitions. You have to memorize it. In the American system, the teacher, as soon as he understand you have the concept you are fine to go. But back home you have to understand and memorize what is this.

*What would you tell someone from Nigeria who is coming to study in the U.S.?*

When I go back, I tell my people, believe it or not American system of education is easy, but do not come to America if you cannot read, write, or speak. If you have those three foundations you will have it very easy because back home they push us to study so the brain is open but there is no structure.

I tell my sister now I buy books, I said everybody has to read this book and when you finish you give to your sister, you pass it over. Get used to the habit of reading, and if you can read it, take a piece of paper. I don't know how to do it, but I don't want what happen to me to happen to my sister, so I say, when you read, write. Just write a part from what they learn. Let's say you read two pages, and you ask yourself what you read. Sometimes you read and your mind is somewhere else you don't understand. Summarize it in your own words, just to get in the habit of doing it.

### CHAPTER THREE

## GLOBAL ENGLISHES, LANGUAGE AESTHETICS, AND PERCEPTIONS OF THE SELF AS SCHOLAR

TWO MEMBERS OF OUR RESEARCH TEAM, Alokoparna Das and Anna Habib, come from diverse cultural and linguistic backgrounds. Although their experiences are vastly different—Alokoparna from India and Anna from Lebanon—they both grew up in post-colonial contexts and were therefore immersed in their native languages, Hindi and Arabic respectively, and the language of the colonial power, English for Alo and French for Anna. When they joined the research team, they brought their multilingual and multicultural perspectives with them. More importantly, however, throughout the research process they have each had the opportunity to reflect on how the post-colonial language dynamic has shaped them as writers in the US Academy. Alo and Anna both found themselves empathizing with the informants and quickly recognized that there is something crucial to be gained from the exchange of stories. They both felt that the informants' stories validated their own experiences and were pleased to see that the informants themselves felt the same sense of relief and encouragement after sharing their own experiences with writing in their native countries and in the US academy.

Many students in writing centers and classrooms carry rich stories that are often kept silent. Anna and Alo both experienced that heavy silence until they joined the team and were able to articulate, develop and discover how their experiences with writing in post-colonial contexts informs and complicates the teaching of writing in US classrooms. What follows are two essays by our informed informants where they reflect on their past experiences as writers in non-US institutions and their integration, several years ago, into the US academy. They weave their own personal experiences with some of our research findings that resonated with each of them and directly spoke to their academic encounters with writing.

## Part I. Global English or ESL: Interference in American Academic Writing

*By Alokparna Das*

I WAS EXTREMELY SKEPTICAL WHEN I began reading literature on non-native academic writing. It seemed that many of the writers were taking the cultural divide of Western thought versus Eastern thought a bit too far. After all, in today's inter-cultural world of internet and cable television, where English is the *lingua-franca*, ideas have mingled, there is more awareness of the differences, and as a result, those differences have started diffusing. However, as the literature pointed out, differences do exist. I realized that I too had to adapt my writing style to suit the needs of my classes in George Mason University. Indeed, the mingling of ideas in an intercultural world is not enough. English is not one prescribed language anymore, it has seeped in the culture of the country it is spoken in, and has become a new incarnation of itself, and all these variations of English have become Global Englishes. Writers of Global Englishes with their diverse cultural backgrounds have diverse writing needs.

### *Post Colonial English*

The British left the legacy of their language in the countries they had colonized. However, the mid 20<sup>th</sup> century British English spoken in the different countries acquired different flavors by borrowing from the local languages and cultures. I come from India, which produces a large number of English speakers. Yet Indians come to the Writing Center frustrated, confused by their instructors' comments. For example, I still do not feel comfortable writing to my instructors or seniors in the US. "Could I meet you on Monday after class for fifteen minutes?" This seems so rude, compared to the "respected sir, it would be a privilege if you could kindly give me the honor of meeting you for fifteen minutes in your extremely busy schedule." And yet, as a tutor at the Writing Center, these are the exact things that I weed out.

*Kanishka from Sri Lanka* said it beautifully:

I was very confident in my writing, but one thing I realized was that I had to really keep my sentences short and not use any colorful words, just take in the least possible number of words and say what you are saying in the simplest possible way. I think to some extent I mastered that but I still feel sad that I am losing a lot of the beauty of the language.

The students from post colonial countries usually speak, read, and write English from an early age. They are confident of their English, especially the grammaticality of it. So when they receive comments such as “disjointed writing” or when their colloquialisms are not understood at all, they feel that their basic language skill is at question, that they somehow did not learn “correct” English. An Indian student came to the Writing Center with the sentence “My house is coming” circled in red. “My house is coming”--meaning, I am getting closer to my house--is a literal English translation of a Hindi phrase and has gained acceptance as an English phrase in India. This is a very common phenomenon in India. Various idioms in local languages are translated into English, and because the meaning is well known, those idioms become accepted in English as well. However, these English translations, as many Indian students have found out, will not be understood in other English speaking parts of the world because of the lack of context. Thus, the transition that the student needs to adjust to is not just between different versions of the English language, but between the cultures that encompass the language.

*Karimatu* from *Nigeria*, who speaks Hausa and English, gave us another view of post colonial English. She told us that Hausa, the language spoken in Nigeria, did not have a written script and had adopted the Arabic script for writing. However, during the British rule, Hausa adopted the Roman alphabet as its written script. So Hausa is written phonetically in English. *Karimatu* spoke English fluently, but had trouble with the writing, because when thinking fast she would write English phonetically as well. She knew this was her major weakness, that despite speaking English fluently from early childhood, she has to work on her academic writing.

In fact, using the English alphabet to write other languages is quite a common phenomenon, popularized by email. It is tedious to download language fonts; it is much easier to transliterate in English.

I email my cousins in Anglicized Bengali, my friends email each other in Romanized Urdu. In fact, we are thinking in Urdu/Bengali, but typing in English, instead of writing in our handwriting. It certainly creates a disorder within the process of writing itself, since in many languages, (as in Urdu) the writing is right to left versus left to right in English, but on the screen of the computer, when transliterating in English, it appears left to right. This technological necessity or benefit, has, on one hand, helped us retain our native languages instead of using only English, but, on the other hand, has not made it necessary to improve writing in either one.

So we learnt that the students from post Colonial English speaking countries need to straddle two cultures, and need to figure out the influence of their culture in the English that they use in their country and the academic English that they have to use in the US. The students themselves are often not aware of the distinction, since, they (as I did) tend to think that all English speakers will think alike.

### *Thinking in English and Global Englishes*

The issue that Second Language writers and speakers face is two-fold. They are not only caught between cultures, but also face the immense challenge of becoming coherent in English and simultaneously acquiring the academic language required to succeed in class. *Kumiko* from *Japan* said, “Even when I try to think in English, Japanese words coming in my brain.” Our students from the Latin American countries also talked about thinking in Spanish and translating. Said *Luis* from *Chile*, “Well, if I have to write fast, I just write it in Spanish.” In fact, thinking in another language is something that I also had to master. In my Hindi class in India, my teacher’s complaint was that I thought in English and wrote in Hindi, so I became aware of the language of thought and it’s relation to the language I wrote in. Most of our informants are aware of the drawbacks of translating, and said that they had to learn to think in English in order to effectively write in English.

Thinking in, and speaking more than one language has had amusing results as well when the two languages are code switched, and so we have Hindlish (HindiEnglish) and Bonglish (BengaliEnglish) and I can speak both fluently, and many other variations of Indlish (Indian English). SpanishEnglish gave rise to Spanglish, and Chinese English to Chinglish, Singaporean English to Singlish, Japanese English

to Japlish and such various other forms of World Englishes have proclaimed their right as an established dialect of English leading to confusions in the written form.

Living within two cultures, thinking and writing in more than one language, these are the challenges that our international students face every day, yet these very challenges enrich their experiences in the American academic setting. As *Sandarshi* eloquently said:

Writing experiences would be different if you knew only one language. I'm sure there are strengths and weaknesses of writing and reading and speaking in many languages. If you only had one language to focus and master and command, the depth and breadth of, it would be completely different. But at the same time, if I didn't have a second or third language, I wouldn't read other things written in a different language and be able to understand...and those things enrich. Every single language you know, how much richer our experiences become.

## **Part II. Understanding the Scholar**

*By Anna Habib*

I CAME TO THIS RESEARCH project with my own stories to tell. I was very passionate about the project because I have always been itching to share my observations and experiences settling into the American Academy. My story, like many of our informants' stories, is complicated by colonialism, war, displacement, and adaptation. I was born in Beirut, Lebanon during the civil war, but only spent my first four years there. My family, like many others, fled to Cyprus, a Mediterranean island divided between the Turks and the Greeks. Because of the mass influx of refugees, my family, who owns a school in Lebanon, opened a branch in Cyprus to accommodate all of the displaced children. The school and its curriculum were modeled after the French Lycee system, a product of the French colonial presence in Lebanon that lasted until 1943. Like many post-colonial schools, this school wrote the native language into its colonial curriculum. So

we learned all of the sciences and humanities in French, but then also learned Arabic, our native language; we focused on the grammar, the conjugation, and the literature, but our teachers didn't spend much time discussing the writing. Many students at these post-colonial schools therefore learn their native language, the colonial language, English as a second language, and then, in my case, Greek as a fourth language, which is the national language of our host country, Southern Cyprus. Most of the attention was on French however, learning the French classics, the French conventions of thinking, the French conventions of writing and therefore I have lost access to the richness of the original scholars in my own language. We learned to mimic the French for so long that now remembering how to creatively or academically express ourselves fully in Arabic can be a challenge.

Needless to say, my story closely resembles the experiences of many of our informants; while conducting the interviews, I found myself constantly nodding in agreement with what our informants were saying. I then realized how important it was for me to hear their stories and in the process validate my own experiences.

One of the most difficult aspects of this research, as others have mentioned already, was making generalizations. Although we were careful not to fall into the limitations of a Kaplan model, we struggled not to misrepresent our informants or their native countries' education systems by making vast generalizations, jumping to conclusions, or romanticizing them as "other." I myself felt torn every time I shared an anecdote about the Lebanese school system because I worried that I was being misleading and diminishing its value by nature of comparing it to the American system.

### *Who Is Allowed to Be "Original"?*

During our very early interviews, we asked our informants whether they had ever learned by "copying" the writing of others. What was interesting was that many of them seemed very defensive at the phrasing of that question and believed we were asking them if they plagiarize. It appeared that they had very quickly learned the severity of "plagiarism" in the American academy and were very nervous about the word "copy". So we revised the questionnaire to include the word "model" instead and that's when we were struck by a common thread: the perception of the roles of scholar and student emerged as a central theme that informed many of our other categories. It stemmed

from our discussion of originality. Who is allowed to originate? The statement “be original” is a consistent part of most writing assignment prompts in the American academy. But when a non-American student is faced with that statement, it can be a major challenge. Our research shows that many students don’t see themselves as originators; to them, the scholar is the originator whom the student mimics. This mimicry serves as practice for the student to sound and experience the thinking, the language and the style of the scholar. Some students copied the style and structure of published works; others not only mimicked the style, but directly copied and memorized texts and were then quizzed on how accurately they replicated the text.

Many of our informants said that most of their writing experiences were in-class, which suggests that there was more emphasis on the repetition of knowledge, rather than the synthesis and analysis of knowledge. Writing is consequently seen as proof of received knowledge rather than as a process of thinking and learning. I too remember having to write most of my essays in class; our teachers were afraid that we would cheat if we took our essays home and to them cheating was using outside research to inform or support your own ideas. In retrospect, I understand that the teachers wanted to see that we were absorbing the information and that it was becoming a part of us. While many of our informants showed frustration with the rote memorization in their school systems, others believed it helped them develop their intellect by teaching them how to essentially become scholars themselves. This approach to learning isn’t against the individual per se, but it is a way to reserve respect for the great thinkers.

A quote by *Sandarshi* from *Sri Lanka* is fitting here:

I think the fact that ideas when disseminated become your ideas when you think about it, when you analyze it. I think it’s the way we’re brought up. You sit and you learn all of the learning comes from wisdom from parents and people in the community. And when you hear it and hear it and hear it, it becomes your way of thinking too, to an extent and there’s no clear distinction between what that person said and what you thought because it becomes embedded in you in terms of processes and your thinking is completely



molded by other things. In that aspect, I agree that there's no formal way of saying so-and-so said it because it becomes common knowledge.

Almost all of our informants did learn how to attribute ideas to the “originator,” but didn't formerly cite the source. If they couldn't remember whom the idea came from, it was acceptable for them to include it without attribution because it became part of the cultural common knowledge. American students, on the other hand, are asked to formally cite their sources while also contributing to the scholarly conversation with their own original ideas. Many of our informants did not feel comfortable interjecting themselves into the academic conversation; they were used to studying the wisdom of the scholars and eventually, through repetition, recycling it into their own knowledge base, as Sandarshi explained in the previous quote. Because many of our informants come from countries where the collective is emphasized over the individual, where knowledge and wisdom are communal, when these students try to write and research in the American academy, they don't feel comfortable asserting their opinion. It is not that they find it too difficult, necessarily, but that they find it too informal, which leads to the perception that the American system is easy. I remember thinking that too, when I first began in the American school system. Expressing yourself isn't what's difficult; sounding like a scholar is. As *Karimatu*, from *Nigeria*, put it:

Yes [it] is easy [here]. Everything you teach me I understand because back home education is very important; we study a lot of hours, not like here two hours you finish the course. Back home from morning til 4:00 [PM] teaching, one class, teaching, teaching, teaching. [F]or example, if they ask you to define ‘politics’, in the British system you have to cram and memorize the definition of ‘politics’. In the American system, the teacher asks you what is politics, you don't have to say politics is defined by so and so person and [repeat the definition] No, [you can say] “oh politics is some kind of government, elected government; in America we have president, the senate, etc.” And as soon as [the professor] understands you have the

concept you are fine to go. But back home you have to understand and memorize [everything about] what [it is.]

### *Definitions of Critical Thinking*

As exemplified by Sandarshi and Karimatu's quotes, it becomes clear that conceptions of "critical thinking" are as diverse as the countries and cultures that they emerge from. Many of the students who grew up with rote memorization see that approach as more beneficial than the American system which emphasizes the individual and expects students to take an analytical stance. It is more impressive to mimic the scholar's ethos than to assume and imagine your own. *Ayesha*, from *Pakistan*, on the other hand, didn't see mimicry as respect for the scholars, but rather blamed it on the inadequacy of her teachers. She told us that they "say 'just memorize it' and write it down so that they don't have to put much effort into reading each student's individual writing. So I would say, for their own ease they just give us a paper and tell us to plagiarize this. It's really funny."

What's particularly interesting about Ayesha's statement is that she may not have called it "plagiarism" if she hadn't moved to the American academy. Also, it raises the question of whether her teachers are encouraging the mimicry of scholars without in fact explaining its benefits to the students. So, perhaps the students in that school system are left thinking that they are always doing busy work that will be easy for their teachers to grade.

This divergent definition of critical thinking is at the heart of the non-native English speaker's relationship to citation. The mimicry approach that many students are used to lead some to paraphrase their research without necessarily citing it. This happens partly because they are not familiar with the concept of plagiarism as it is defined in the American academy and partly because they have not learned how to engage with the scholars because it is not common practice in their education systems. When I first started writing in the American academy, I struggled to find the language that would allow me to analyze texts—I remember feeling so frustrated because I had it all in my head—my ideas were there—but the analytical language was not.

It is important to acknowledge that not all of our informants had the same hesitations about including analysis and opinion in their writing. Our Spanish speaking students (both South American and

European) are very familiar with the concept of plagiarism although they told us that don't have such serious repercussions as we do in the American academy. Our Colombian informant, *Diana*, defined "good writing" in *Columbia* as "[being] original and creative"; she said she feels like the assignment prompts in her North American classrooms are too restrictive and don't give her enough freedom to develop her ideas. Although most of our Spanish speakers did say that their system is "more or less" what it is in the U.S., they too had more in-class writing exams than take-home essays, reflecting once again a varying definition of "critical thinking" whereby memorization might serve as the barometer for sophisticated and successful thinking.

Several of our informants perceived creative exercises like reflective and personal writing— and by personal they mean opinionated— as an integral part of American writing pedagogy, but not an approach that was taken in their native countries. Many stated that they were often given a very specific essay question for their in-class writing assignments. They expressed that those in-class assignments were regarded as proof of studied knowledge versus discovery, analysis and interaction with knowledge. Several of our informants appreciated the openness of the American system because they felt that it was liberating and sparked their inherent curiosity; these informants clearly connected this approach to the American definition of critical thinking. Take *Ayesha* from *Pakistan's* quote as an example:

I would say, if you are given a topic, the more you read about it, and the more research you do about it, the more it broadens your vision. And I really enjoy that. I really enjoy that everything is new to me (...) And it feels so light when I have done my research properly and then I write something down. I just feel so good.

Not all of our informants found the American approach as freeing as *Ayesha* did, however. Since many are used to reading in order to memorize, they are not used to reading critically and annotating the text. They simply absorb the text without necessarily engaging it. This leads to indecision when writing in the American academy because they haven't taken a solid stance vis-à-vis the text. What they are

trained to study is the author's language and style, not the structural components or rhetorical appeals, as many students here are asked to consider.

### *Cultural Aesthetics of Language*

The aesthetic appeal of the written language thus emerged as a major theme across the board. Our informants used the following adjectives to describe their native languages: romantic, rich, metaphorical, flowery, complex, attractive, sweet, classical. Rather than seeing language as a conduit for their ideas, they were focused on the aesthetic appeal of their native language, a trait that they felt was missing from the American English language. As *Malak* from *Saudi Arabia* put it, "It's using the words to draw a picture; it's not like using the wording in its simple meaning." In the writers' native countries, a great deal of attention was given to the way one expresses their ideas, rather than the depth of the ideas themselves. This could result from the emphasis on sounding like the scholar, rather than engaging with him per se.

Many of the informants felt confused when they first began writing in the American academy because they were translating the "richness" of their language into English, thinking that the American academy, like their native countries, held language itself to a high esteem." *Hanyan* from *China* said, "In English, I try to use big words, but I don't use them correctly, so it makes my paper look weird." Most of them talked about how they used long, involved sentences when they first arrived, but were then surprised when their professors told them to "keep it simple"; *Ayesha* echoed her professors' words by emphasizing the importance of the three Cs: be complete, be concise, be clear. Most of the informants seem to recognize that something special is lost when they translate into English and simplify the language. As *Kanishka* from *Sri Lanka* put it:

[When I first moved here], I was told over and over again that I had to cut down, clean up my paragraphs. I was very offended because I came with a lot of confidence behind me and suddenly I found that it is totally different here. (...) Any nice language I use is wasted, no one is going to look at it in that way. (...) I noticed unless it is a technical word, they encourage you to use the easier word in place of the

more difficult one. So that way I think I left a lot of words by the wayside and styled my writing also to suit what is demanded here. It is a bittersweet kind of experience because I am sad to let go of some of the words.

Not only do non-native English speakers struggle to “keep it simple” on the surface level, but they also feel that something much deeper is lost in translation. *Ayesha* told us, “When I write in *Urdu*, my cultural thing comes to me. How am I going to put that in English, you know?” What she is expressing here is a distance from—or closeness to—the culture behind the language, which determines how successfully you engage your audience. When the writer is immersed in the same culture as the reader, there is a mutual understanding and appreciation for the language that is being used. So, the “sweetness” of *Urdu*, as *Ayesha* called it, brings with it the history and values of her Pakistani and Muslim culture. An American reader who has a different set of expectations about the function of language will not see how the “complex” sentences are embedded and tangled in the culture.

Not all of the NNS felt discouraged or frustrated by their language and writing barriers; I would like to end with a quote from *Minhee* from *S. Korea*. When asked how she feels about writing in English, she said: “I enjoy and sometimes I get knocked out by my sentences because it’s so good.”

## Ayesha

Native country – Pakistan  
Languages – Urdu and English  
Undergraduate – Accounting

*On adjusting to academic writing in the U.S.:*

When I moved here, it was like a complete different experience. I wasn't using any of the styles they teach here. So I have to start from the beginning because I wasn't aware of the concept of the thesis statement, and all that, and how to be concise.

*On the importance of keeping her own culture and language:*

When my family moved here, they thought they were losing their roots, because obviously my nephews and all, they were born here and they are going to school here, so they are not in touch with Urdu as much as we are, my sister and I. So obviously, just to teach them, we promote speaking in Urdu at home, and tell them not to speak English with their elders as well.

*Do you feel that your native language still influences your writing in English and vice versa?*

Well, the Urdu writers, they are really good as well, and I have read their poetry and stuff and they are quite strong. I don't know, its sets me in complete different frame of mind when I am writing in Urdu. When I am writing in English, I think in a completely different way. I like both languages, but I think Urdu is much richer, and much sweeter. I don't know, I just feel it.

*What is considered good when writing in English?*

The three Cs: complete, concise, and clarity. And the thesis statement I would say, and, you know, the conclusion, and [learning] all that was really helpful. My tenses, they kind of shift from past to present. This is what I really am bad at, because, obviously, when I am thinking in my native language and then, when I put that in English, I somehow shift the past and present tense. ... And I have to think of words, I get stuck on the words, okay, I knew the word in Urdu, so what should I put here?

*On the joy of research:*

I would say, if you are given a topic, the more you read about it, and the more research you do about it, the more it broadens your vision. And I really enjoy that everything is so new to me. Because most of the topic they give us, I never have done research on them. So I really enjoy doing research on them. I get so excited. I'm like, okay, I am going to learn something new today. So, if I am given more time, I go ahead and read more books and collect the information and then get the idea, and then put it down. And it feels so light when I have done my research properly and then I write something down. I just feel so good.

*On progress in writing:*

I can compare the first time I was at the writing center to now, and I would say that I have improved a lot. The first time I was at the Writing Center, I did not have any structure, didn't know anything about the MLA or the APA style, I just wrote down some kind of thing, and, you know, I used to write summary [compared to analysis]. Now I would say I have improved a lot. I would say the writing center is a brilliant idea. I can't do without it, believe me. Some of my friends, they make fun of me, they say, "If we can't find you anywhere, we know you are at the writing center."

## CHAPTER FOUR

### WRITING PROCESSES, READERS' EXPECTATIONS, AND GRAMMAR ANXIETY

WHEN NON-NATIVE STUDENTS COME to study in the U.S., they encounter not only different expectations for them as academic writers but also very different attitudes about the role of writing as an important vehicle for learning and explaining what one has learned. In this chapter, we describe the attitudes about writing and learning that our informants told us are prevalent in their native countries, how they have had to adjust to academic audiences and expectations here, and the anxieties many of them feel about succeeding as writers in this new environment where “good” writing often looks very different from what they have learned to produce in their native countries.

#### *Writing as a Transparent Process*

In most of the countries in which our informants were educated, whether high school or college, they did not take courses in writing nor were they given instruction in how to write the papers which were required in many of their courses. It is taken for granted that they already know how to write based on instruction they received early in their schooling on shaping the letters of the alphabet and learning the principals of grammar. The assumption is that if they have the information in their heads, they should be able to put it on paper clearly in a style reflective of the linguistic and cultural preferences of their native countries and/or locales. Writing processes, in other words, are almost completely transparent, and decisions about structure and organization are left up to the students<sup>6</sup>. Until they came to the U.S., most of our informants did not have a language for talking about writing as discovery, about

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<sup>6</sup> Until the mid-sixties, when writing process pedagogies took hold, writing instruction in the U.S. also proceeded from the western rhetorical understanding of writing as a direct transcription of thinking onto paper. Thus, if one did not fully know or understand the topic, one could not write clearly. This assumption is still very much present in many disciplines and for many teachers who do not think of writing as a means to discover and learn and who routinely tell students that clear thinking leads to clear writing.



thesis and topic sentences, and, except very generally, about the genres of academic writing. In the latter, however, they are not unlike our native-born students—and most teachers outside of composition studies—who tend to describe the characteristics of academic writing in broad, abstract terms, e.g. “clear,” “correct,” “to the point” (see, for example, Thaiss and Zawacki).

Many of our informants told us that in general they were expected to know the topic and then write. *Shen-Shyang*, from *Singapore*, said, for example, “You must have all of the ideas inside your brain, then you can write. We never talked about strategies. After I have something [on paper], I start playing around with it. Maybe that’s a strategy, but you cannot write before having an idea.” *Ayesha*, from *Pakistan*, speculated that writing “comes naturally. They didn’t teach writing. We would just write and they would never tell us our weaknesses, like, say, you are weak at this thing, so try to practice. No, they would just think that the whole class is the same, and if someone is writing the best essay ever, we are supposed to write the same way.”

In *Bulgaria*, *Tonka* said, she had “a lot of freedom on how to approach a topic. You have a high expectation to be able to understand ... [structure] is not elaborated on as it is here.” The differences in approaches to writing in Bulgaria and the U.S. made Tonka think that “how a society thinks reflects a lot the way of writing.” *Karimatu* explained that because there is little emphasis on writing in *Nigeria*, “that is something I am now suffering from. I have my ideas, I have my feelings, I have my emotions, as regular writers, but I don’t have the ability to write them down.”

While they may not have had explicit instruction in how to write a paper, many of our informants talked about learning to write from what they read, particularly those who were taught to write from models of others’ writing, as we’ve already noted. Not surprisingly, most of our informants said that the first time they really thought about the process of writing was when they began studying in the U.S. although there were a few exceptions. *Angela*, for example, said that in her *Greek* high school she was accustomed to receiving very specific instructions for writing and also feedback on drafts. *Luis* said that in *Chili* “you have to show it to the teacher during the process, and she goes page by page and tells me what is good and what is not.”

While the majority of our informants received little instruction in writing in their native countries, it was interesting to us to learn that,

when informants talked about learning to write in English—in English courses in their native countries and/or for the TOEFL or GRE—they frequently named rhetorical modes to describe the papers they'd written, e.g. “narratives,” “descriptions,” and “arguments.” Their use of this modes-based terminology suggests that their teachers (and the test preparation materials) rely on traditional approaches to teaching writing, where the mode itself seems to be the exigence for writing rather than the audience or purpose. *Minhee, S. Korea*, for example, told us, in response to our question about her experiences writing in English prior to coming to the U.S., “I’ve done a comparison essay, and argumentative, persuasive, narrative, descriptive—oh, but my teacher didn’t call it descriptive, it was expository. And then analytic, and then we did research.” Minhee’s self-correction of “descriptive” to the even broader category of “expository” and her addition of “analytic” and “research” to describe her writing experiences further reveals students’ confusion about what their purposes for writing may be, other than to practice rhetorical forms and demonstrate that they have mastered them<sup>7</sup>.

### *Reader-responsible vs. Writer-responsible Writing*

Many of our informants were also confused about why their teachers in the U.S. placed so much emphasis on structuring a paper, including having an explicit thesis and topic sentences. For many, this confusion stems from their experiences writing within “reader-responsible” cultures. In “reader-responsible” languages, according to John Hinds’ influential “typology” across languages, the burden is on readers for extracting the meaning from the text. In Asian cultures in particular (e.g. Japanese, Korean, Chinese, Thai), readers expect ambiguity and imprecise writing as they work their way inductively through the text. In contrast, in our writer-responsible culture, English-speaking readers expect writers to be explicit and direct. Because of these differing expectations, Hinds says, English-speaking writers typically compose across multiple drafts whereas Japanese writers, for example, may compose only one draft, which is the final product. Even in highly structured genres like the scientific research report, according to many scholars of contrastive rhetoric, reader-responsible conventions are

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7 In this the non-native writers are not unlike many of our native writers who also do not see any compelling reasons to write in school beyond fulfilling a teacher’s assignment, as Thaiss and Zawacki’s research shows.

still apparent<sup>8</sup>.

In a writer-responsible culture such as ours, we typically expect the writer's thesis or focus to appear somewhere in the first or second paragraph and to indicate clearly the purpose and direction of the paper; similarly, topic sentences focus paragraphs and point back to the thesis. In turn, each paragraph is expected to provide evidence for the points being made. All of our informants were easily able to describe these features of academic English, which, they said, is "straightforward," "obvious," "easy for readers," "direct," "straight to the point," "clear," "simple," "concise," "open," "efficient," and "honest."

Conversely, many described writing in their native languages as being much more "abstract" with little need for explicit signposting. Although we hesitate to make generalizations, we noticed that students from Asian backgrounds in particular tended to see writing in their native country as having a more subtle, implicit approach.

*Hanyan*, a nursing undergraduate from *China*, explained, "Here thesis is very obvious, but in Chinese, we don't write something so obviously. We like to allow the reader to think about it. In China, I wrote short essays. Parts may be awkward to Americans but Chinese understand because of culture" Additionally, *Hanyan* points out, "In U.S. organization, transitions, focus are very important; they want this essay to be easier for readers. The readers don't need to think about something because writers have to write everything."

*Yoon*, an undergraduate majoring in Communications, said, "I think American people are more straightforward. Even in the classroom, somebody present and they said, 'Oh this is not good, this isn't really good.' But in *Korea* they don't mention what they think honestly, so even if not that good, they say, 'Oh, you did a good job.' They all the time pointing to the good thing; they don't want to mention the bad thing, even though they think it in their mind. The American people are more directly focused on what they think, so this ends up in their conclusions too. But in *Korea* they don't directly mention. It is a cultural thing, American people are more honest."

While *Kanishka*, a *Sri Lankan* PhD candidate in Public Policy, saw cultural differences in expectations for the structure and style of

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8 Hinds' theory connects with Edward Hall's typology of "high context" and "low context" cultures, with the former valuing an implicit communication style (writer-responsible) and the latter an explicit style.

a paper, he also understood that purpose and audience are related to the shape of writing.

Here it is a more functional language, and practical, and I think professional too, because you know that is what people are looking for. ...I am used to writing where you are demonstrating the beauty of the language, [which is] pretty much different from where you try to convey a quick message. They would be two different arenas totally, so maybe if you are doing something in an office, maybe you shouldn't use too much beautiful language, that doesn't make sense. Just tell me what you are telling me and that makes sense. What is your point--that is the thing. The time restrictions and the deadlines and the bottom lines.

*Tonka*, an international relations major who was trained as a Writing Center tutor, noted that these differences had to do with reader and writer-responsible points of reference. "At the beginning," she said,

My language was influencing my writing in terms of wording. I remember my first essays and the ways that I was taught in high school to write in a more abstract way, going around the topic ...and making your reader connect the dots and get to your point. That was emphasized a lot. This abstract, I guess you would say, reader responsible writing. Making the reader think about it, this was valued. But then I started reading in English, which was a big help, and I saw how professors were expecting me to write--state your point and support it, instead of lead me around to your point.

Getting to the point, *Tonka* understood, also means writing "short clear sentences, that was a thing I learned here. Clarity, straight-forwardness, and being able to be understood by your audience because you're writing for a specific audience. The audience wasn't stressed much in Bulgaria, but it's stressed a lot here."

*Efrata*, Ethiopian-born and Russian educated, explained that academic writing here also seems much more open. An undergraduate in Russian studies and global affairs, she noted that

Here you are expected to write about your life stories, like tell us this and that. I think it is just more open, more laid back. I don't think it is secretive, you know. And in Russia it is like you keep to yourself. The whole society, they will open up to you when they get to know you. Here, it depends on individual because there are so many different kinds of people here. You know, obviously, it is okay to be different. So in terms in writing, [In Russia]...it would be more like strictly academic, you write about a book, you write about an event, or historic event, or whatever.

*Sandarshi* connected this openness to subjective vs. objective approaches:

Back in my country [*Sri Lanka*], it's more objective. Particularly academic writing is more objective. Not so subjective; you don't bring your personal opinion. People don't care about your personal opinion. You just analyze the data in a more clinical fashion back home. You write in the third person, you would never write...you'd never insert 'I' into an academic piece. Ever. It wouldn't be appropriate. You'd always write in the third person.

### *Structure*

As our informants talked about writing processes and reader expectations, it became clear to us that these were inextricably linked to what they had learned about structuring a piece of writing, both here and in their native countries, so this section of findings will necessarily overlap the one before.

Our informants often commented on a lack of emphasis on structure when writing in their native languages, as we've noted; some learned about formats and conventions for academic writing in English for the

first time when they were studying for the TOEFL or GRE exams. As students in the U.S., however, all recognized the heavy emphasis their teachers place on thesis, clear organization, and concise language and contrasted this with the “natural” or unstructured way of writing they were used to in their native countries.

For *Karimatu*, from *Nigeria*, who expressed considerable anxiety about her writing ability, what was good about her writing was that she could “write my ideas as they flowed into my head.” But what is “good,” she said, depends on the reader. “If the reader has an English background, she might say this is not organized, but if it is a Hausa reader, then this is what is expected. [Hausa] doesn’t have a lot of rules and regulations like the English. ...Here you can read somebody’s paper and, if you are a good writer, you can figure out a bad writer right there and then. But back there is less emphasis on the writing itself....”

In *Colombia*, *Diana* explained, papers “should be written as how you think. That’s the main difference between writing in English and in Spanish. It is not the sentence grammar—the subject and the verb and the complement—because that’s something that’s still the same thing in Spanish. But the structure of the thinking and the process of how you think is the difference.”

Good writing here, *Diana* has learned, is “very very precise. Very very organized. You get your ideas specific and develop them and you do not jump from one paragraph to another. If something concerns one idea, it should be in that paragraph and not in another, that kind of thing.” She added, based on her experiences in courses in her psychology major, “Here, sometimes I think that too much structure doesn’t allow students to think really, because everything is on the paper and you have to follow it and sometimes I feel like, stop it, I want to do something else but I can’t because it’s off of the rubric.”

Like *Diana*, many of our informants contrasted organizational styles/preferences in the American academy with those of their native countries. In *China*, where readers are expected to be responsible for comprehending the text, *Hanyan* said, “We don’t need to write obvious topic sentences in the beginning; if you understand what the author is saying, you can understand. The main difference is that English is obvious. After coming to the U.S., I learned from ESL classes and ENG 101 classes the logic: thesis in first paragraph to state opinion and you have to write topic sentences in each paragraph.”

Similarly, *Yoon* said,

In *Korean* type of writing is we have to write the main thesis or main sentence at the end of the writing. So the first thing we have to do is give some [idea] related to the main theme of the paper. So, for example, women have to get freedom [is the theme], so we have to put the examples first. And people think about what the woman's freedom is and how it is developed. At the end of the paper we have to write why ..., so my thesis of the paper is this and this, and that is why I think this is so. But in America, you guys put the thesis sentence at the beginning of the paper. But I [write] totally different style in the paper and the professor say "Where are you from? How you get into the college?"

"At first I had a lot of troubles with [the format here]," *Ignacio*, a government major from *Spain* told us,

Because I thought that the introduction was just like presentation of the topic with nothing else. But then I found out that besides presenting the topic, you have to state already which are going to be your arguments throughout the paper. You have to say in the introduction what you are going to say, then you have to sort of link the introduction with the development with a final sentence, and you have to start development with a sentence, and you have to develop your thesis with an example, then finish introducing the other statement or argument, then wrapping up everything with the conclusion. Tell me what you are going to tell me, tell me, then tell me what you told me. I found it pretty restricting at first. I felt like I was repeating myself all the time. But now I am more at ease with it.

In *Sri Lanka*, *Kanishka* said,

I am thinking that what they emphasized was mostly completeness. You had to tie up all ends by the time you finished. It is that kind of structure more than organization itself. You should not leave anything unattended, you know, whatever you mentioned early on. But besides that I am thinking they didn't emphasize too much where you should have these different components of the essay. Maybe one thing similar is the conclusion. They say you have to try to catch everything ... you have refresh everyone what you are talking about. So I think that is the kind of advice I come across [there], but nothing about the start actually.

*Malak*, from *Saudi Arabia*, also noted differing structural, and stylistic, expectations for writing in Arabic, "It's different than in English because in English it's better to have more simple structure. Cleanly writing the ideas that you have. Right grammar; the structure of having an introduction and conclusion."

Of organization in *Bulgaria*, *Tonka* said, "Of course there is introduction and thesis and body part and conclusion, but it's not as explained, as elaborated on, as it is over here in the United States. I guess it's harder to write concisely and that's why instructors here pay so much attention to writing and there's books written and whole manuals on how to write. Whereas in Bulgaria, there's a lot of freedom on how to approach a topic."

### *Role of (and Anxiety about) Grammar and Vocabulary*

As our informants became more aware of writing for a reader and, in turn, the expectations of readers in the American academy, they also tended to feel insecure about their ability to live up to those readers' expectations, particularly when their teachers focused on the errors they were making rather than on content and the things they were doing well. Many informants expressed concern over grammatical mistakes and inadequate vocabulary to express otherwise sophisticated ideas. Many also indicated that having error-free, grammatically correct sentences was an important part of "good writing."



*Ting*, from *China*, told us that one of her professors in her graduate program “didn’t even want to continue reading because he felt disappointed about my language.” *Haifeng*, also Chinese, was “shocked” when he saw his professor’s feedback on his writing.

My professor just circle and say this is awkward, there is a word choice problem. So I just go to find some senior students here to find an alternative for that word, because I don’t know what is a bad word [or a good word] to express the idea. For the sentence things the professor give me some examples of how to express in a better way. So next time I am going to use that way. I care very much. I think this writing is critical for our success in this discipline so I just try to use the way he express. And I do some reading, and I think this piece is very impressive. I am going to try to write it down or remember it in another way, and I will try to use it when I write next time.

Many of our informants learned English grammar formally, apart from their instruction in writing in English. This did not always lead to better writing. *Yoon*, from *So. Korea*, told us, for example, that while she has learned a lot of the grammar terms, “I don’t know where I should put [words] in the sentence.” Informants also tended to think that English grammar was more complicated than the grammar of their native language, typically because they have internalized the grammatical structures they learned as infants and do not have to think about how these translate to writing. As *Sri*, from *India*, said, “You know, I’m so much into my own language, that I can’t really identify an aspect of it and say, ‘this is how I learned it’.”

In this, the informants are like all literate people who write in a first language(s) without giving conscious thought to the grammar of the sentences unless or until a question arises about correctness. When writers question their grammar, sentence structure, and/or punctuation choices, they draw on “school” grammar to figure out what form is correct. If a writer does not recognize that his/her prose contains errors, then “school” grammar (or grammar learned in isolation from one’s

writing) is likely to be less than useful<sup>9</sup>.

In *Urdu*, *Ayesha* said, the grammar “was simple. The structure was already in my mindset, so ...just naturally I go ahead and write it the right way.” While teachers used to talk about “adjectives, nouns, and tense,” she said, they “never told us how to put them in a sentence and what should go before what.”

Similarly, *Tonka* explained,

To me, grammar especially in your native language is something you just learn it the first day you start speaking. Like you’ll write a sentence, you might make spelling mistakes when you’re little; but grammatically it will sound right. While in English, it was more of consciously learning it. It was something I had to think about when I wrote and make sure that, say, I had an S on the end and the tenses matched in the sentence. In Bulgarian, I never really had to think about it until they brought back the grammar as in “today we are going to study grammar” or “this year we are going to study grammar” and they start showing which is the subject and which is the verb and we had different ways to underline it. When they brought up the concepts of what the verb was and what tense and that different terminology, I had to struggle a lot. I knew that when I wrote a sentence it wouldn’t be incorrect. I knew it would make sense [apart from knowing the grammar terms].. But learning in English, you could not do it without knowing the terminology and without knowing what things are and why they need to be there. English also makes me ask a lot of questions like “Why is it this way?” Because to me, I learn better if I understand it. In Bulgarian I don’t have to ask why something is because that’s the way

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9 See Patrick Hartwell’s “Grammar, Grammars, and the Teaching of Grammar” for a good discussion of the levels of grammar and usage we move through as language learners.

it is. While in English there's a reason behind it.

Several Chinese students commented on the lack of grammar rules in Chinese and the emphasis they notice on grammar and rules in English. At first, we assumed these students from China might be remarking on learning English as a second or third language, forcing them to be conscious about implementing grammar rules they had studied, as opposed to their native language in which the grammar was learned unconsciously. But, upon careful review of their observations, it appears that they are actually saying Chinese has fewer rules, specifying, for example, the absence of tenses and clauses, and less rigid sentence construction. *Shen-Shyang*, a computer science PhD student from *Singapore*, explained, "Chinese has less grammar than English. So we don't have past-present, future tense. We don't have a lot of things compared to English. So grammar is usually not a very difficult thing in Chinese writing.... [Learning it] is more from experience. The teacher says you should not do this, you should not do that. Rather than in English where there are rules." *Cheryl*, also from *Singapore*, said something similar: "In the Chinese language, it doesn't have this grammar thing too much. So I think it's easier to affect because we don't have much grammar in Chinese so when we write in English we tend to...somehow those passages should be there."

While *Haifeng*, a PhD candidate in Public Policy, also noticed this difference, he believed that English gave him more options for expressing academic arguments.

I should say that English is more rigid language than *Chinese*. In Chinese is more flexible than English. For the verbs, there is no tense and, for instance, for the [English] 'go, went, gone', in China we have just 'go.' And you have some other ways, like adverbs or some words to [mark] that when things happen, but we don't change. .... And I think is more logic than Chinese as well. I don't know how to say this but.... you can have different kind of ways [to] express very logic things in just one big sentence. And [if you] analyze the structure of the sentence, you know [it] is very rigid ...but, in Chinese, if you want to express

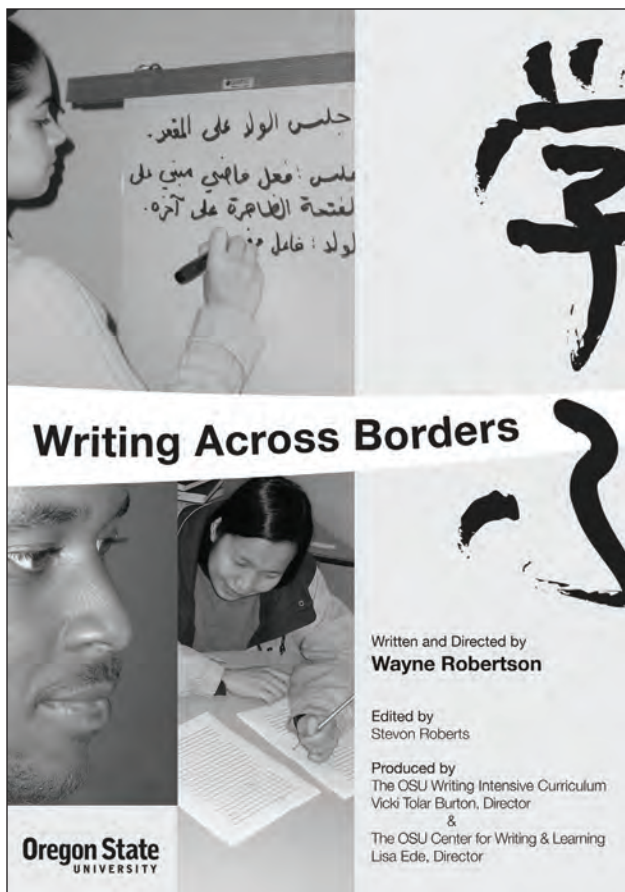
the same meaning you have to use many sentence. One reason because there is no clause. I just think that, because of these things, I think is better for academic writing than Chinese. Now I been here about two years I think is easier for me to write an academic paper in English than Chinese.

### *Consciousness about Voice*

Their concerns about grammar and vocabulary also led many of our informants to feel that they could not project the same confident voice that they had prided themselves on in their native languages. While *Diana*, from *Columbia*, felt confident that she could organize her papers in English, she did not feel as secure when it came to projecting a strong voice in English. “My strength in Spanish, I would say, is my personal style of how to write, and I guess that’s something that people like. And the grammar, my grammar in Spanish is really good, and the use of like, the synonyms, and a good vocabulary. In English, definitely, I would like to have more vocabulary, so I can do that [same thing].” *Ayesha*, from *Pakistan*, lamented her lack of English vocabulary: “I am really short of words. I would really love to learn nice words, because I do have ideas, and I do want to put something down, but I am short of words.”

*Sri*, who writes in *Telugu* and *Hindi*, explained,

It all comes down to vocabulary; it’s not your thought, because every person who does even a bit of schooling is blessed with some thought or another in his or her chosen field, but it’s the expression.... I mean ... everybody grows up in a language, so *everybody* has an enriching experience as they grow up. So it’s never lack of original thoughts, it’s the expression and that comes when you have a solid vocabulary base. You have to have to know which word to use to express your thought.



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## **Diana**

Native country – Colombia

Languages – Spanish and English

Graduate student – Counseling Psychology and Human Development

*How do you compare writing in English and Spanish?*

Now that I have to write in English, I realize that in Spanish we write really romantically, so we take long, long sentences and use complex words and try to have examples and metaphors, and that kind of thing, but they're not working here.

*What do you consider to be "good writing" in Columbia?*

I guess that 'specific' was not one of the words I should use to be like a good writer in Columbia, especially because you have to explain and give examples... the word that comes to my mind is very romantically and politically correct, and long, long sentences, a lot of paragraphs, and give an idea and then bring it back in the next paragraph, and if something needs to be added, you can bring it in the last part of the essay. It's not organized or as structured as it is here—very philosophical, I guess.

*What do you consider good writing in the U.S.?*

Very, very precise. Very, very organized. Develop the ideas, have an outline of what you want to draw, to explain, and get your ideas specific, and develop them. Do not jump from one paragraph to another, if something concerns an idea, it should be in that paragraph and not in another.

*When you write, do you think in Spanish and translate to English?*

I have to force myself to be conscious about trying to avoid it, because it's easier if I just keep thinking in Spanish and then translate it, but I don't want

to because it's not the way it should be. Why? Because then I would not get the grammar correct, and the ideas I wanted, and there are two different processes. So I know it's not going to be a good paper if I do that. Maybe because I learned to speak English later on, I mean, not a very young age, so my process of thinking is already in Spanish. The beginning was even worse and more difficult to try to switch to English and start talking and understanding and writing.

*On influence of native language on English:*

I find out that the pace and the music of both languages are different. So while writing in Spanish I should tune myself in a frequency. In English it's a new one that I am learning to really master it.

*Contrasting strengths in Spanish and English writing:*

My strength in Spanish is, I would say, there is a personal style of how to write, and I guess that's something that people like. And my grammar in Spanish is really good, and the use of the synonyms, and a good vocabulary. And in English, definitely, I would like to have more vocabulary so I can do that. And of course when I don't know a word, I just try to describe what I meant with a sentence, so that makes it longer and hard to read. Not good.

*On structure impeding creativity:*

Here it's very structured and very organized, and sometimes I think that too much structure maybe don't allow students to think really, because everything is on the paper and you have to follow it and sometimes I feel like, stop it, I want to do something else but I can't because it's off of the rubric. It's very, very, very specific.

*What have teachers done that has been particularly helpful to your writing?*

Here I really appreciate that they take the time to actually check what I did not good, ideas that I omit, the comma, the semi-colon. I really appreciate that they take their time to do that. And also I appreciate the sample papers. I think it's a great idea to really understand what they want for the paper.

## CHAPTER FIVE

### WHAT THE STORIES TEACH US: IMPLICATIONS AND NEXT STEPS

**W**E HAVE LEARNED A LOT from our informants over the past couple of years; one of the most complicated and constructive statements we heard from one of our informants—who shall remain unnamed—was as follows:

I don't want to mention about the professor, but honestly there was one professor, she was white and I got very stereotype about the white female professor (...). I experience the true discrimination because she treat me like really loser and even though I don't get some terms she use in the class so I ask her, but she says "you bother the class and your writing is behind the line so you can't really catch up the class." So I don't know how to figure that out.

This informant is right. It is difficult to figure out how to find that balance. It can be very challenging and time-consuming to fully accommodate our non-native English speaking students when we don't necessarily have the background in English as a Second Language and when we're trying to meet a wide variety of student needs. The most important realization for us during this research, however, is that listening to their stories is in fact extremely productive for both the student and the faculty; the non-native writer feels validated and understood and the instructor has a solid foundation for working with international and immigrant student writers.

By understanding even just a little the history of the non-native writer's language acquisition and educational systems, we have learned so much that informs our roles as instructors and writing center administrators and tutors. We have compiled some of our most salient findings as they pertain to classroom instruction and writing center resources:



*Informants' Experiences with Writing in Their Courses*

Many of our informants expressed concern about their assignment prompts, which are usually designed with native students in mind. Assignments often call for an awareness of American socio-political and cultural context that many non-native writers do not have. As a result, some indicated that they had to spend more time interpreting the assignment and its context than their American classmates. As Yoon put it:

Since Journalism major is very connected to the politics, there is a lot of issues that deal with politics, or cultural background, or some historical issues. So if I don't know when , [for example], African American people get freedom, or how they get it, or women's right in United States or gay and lesbian movement, I don't know when they start or how they developed. I am taking a Woman and Media class right now, [and we're learning] so many [things about how women impacted the media, of which] I don't know any...a teacher gave me the list of the women to pick from and to do a presentation at the end of the semester. I don't know any of the names on the paper so I look up the internet and search each different people and I found one people I think is interesting. That is the hard thing, even there what they did during their life, I don't know anything of American historical issue.

Yoon also reminds us that “if you understand the question then it's not that big deal to write down, but if you don't understand the question, then you totally miscalculate all the focus.”

Along the same lines, many students struggle with vague, open or creative exercises because they are not used to writing assignments that ask them to go beyond the basic structured assignment prompts. It is therefore crucial for instructors to give very specific and careful directions on their assignment prompts. Also, the commonly used phrasing—“be original”—should be more clearly defined since

“originality” is not only subjective and therefore vague to all students<sup>10</sup>, but also opens up a new set of problems for non-native writers. “Originality,” as discussed in chapter three, is defined differently across writing cultures. Yoon explained her experience with creative and non-directive assignments as follows:

If a teacher asks me to give some specific idea, and then writer it down and do some research and make a paper—that is easy. But more creative things.... you make a campaign so you analyze how you are going to do your campaign. That kind of thing is hard. [Last year] my professor asked me to make a specific campaign. [He asked] “who is the target audience and how are you going to target your audience and what kind of strategy are you going to do for you campaign?” That was really hard (...) For foreign students, very specific form is more easier. But more creative things, you can make your own paper, make it creative, and there is no specific way, so you have to create your own campaign, your own paper. But some American students love this because they more freely express their knowledge and writing skills. For foreign students is awkward, question is very hard to figure out.

Not only were creative exercises challenging, but assignments that asked students to reflect on a given text were difficult as well. *Angela* from *Greece* told us, “[I] didn’t have a lot of response essays, like ‘read a passage and write about it.’ [I had] a lot of summaries [and] not as many creative exercises, like ‘go write a story about something.’ It was more based on what you were reading in the books, the textbooks.”

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10 Many of the native writers participating in focus groups for Thaiss and Zawacki’s research commented on how difficult it was to figure out what a teacher’s injunction to “be original” might mean when, as one student said, “I have no idea what my teacher’s concept of originality is.”

Non-native writers struggle to contribute in class not necessarily because they are embarrassed of their accents, but sometimes it is because they are used to more “teacher-centered” classrooms. *Somkuan*, from *Thailand*, explained it as follows:

[Our classrooms in Thailand] are teacher-centered because when we walk into the classroom, we [don’t know what to expect], whatever the teacher will tell us. We just listen, just like the lecture, to the teacher, to what they want to tell. It’s like that. But it doesn’t mean that all the time because sometime the teacher ask the question but it’s like we were trained not to be active in the classroom, so not much discussion, just listen and then do homework like that in the classroom. But nowadays change because when I read the newspaper [I see] they try to have the children center, have the children speak up to show us the idea. This is what the American system does, right? So that mean the student have to show the idea, have to speak out and they are independent and they have to study more and more.

We also heard concerns about speaking up in class because sometimes students are able to articulate their ideas better in class than in writing at home and are worried about building high expectations for their writing. As one of our informants said, “It is causing me trouble because my teacher is seeing those ideas are coming, but this writing is bad, so now I am going to stop talking because it makes the teacher know you and have higher expectations ... for your paper.”

Many, as we’ve already noted, said they learned appropriate academic conventions for writing in their native language and in English by copying others and mimicking the styles and structures of the texts they read. When asked what advice they would give to others learning to write in their majors, almost all said that it is important to read a lot in the major. As *Sandarshi* said, “In any field, you can’t just write without knowing what’s out there.”

Several of our informants reflected on how helpful it is for their professors here to be directive and constructive, not only in their assignment prompts, but also in their criticism. *Ayesha* said, “Over

here if I just come up with a weird idea, and I have something in my mind, and if I go to my professor, and he or she would explain that to me. But they are really helpful, they do go through my papers. I can submit a rough draft, and they will say ‘okay, these are the points you need to add to your paper.’ They are really helpful. They always tell me to ‘put more citation in, you have quoted wrong’.” *Diana* echoed *Ayesha*’s appreciation for their professor’s time and feedback: “Here, I really appreciate that they take the time to actually check what I did not good, ideas that I omit, the comma, the semi-colon, I really appreciate that they take their time to do that, and also I appreciate the sample papers, I think it’s a great idea to really understand what they want for the paper.”

Others, on the other hand, felt offended by their professor’s comments when they first began writing for the US Academy. *Kanishka* described his initial experience as follows:

When I first began writing at [another U.S. institution], that is where I had my initial friction between the cultures and what I was told over and over again “you know you have to cut down, clean up your paragraphs.” To me I was very offended because I came with a lot of confidence behind me and suddenly I find that is totally different. But it didn’t take me long to catch up though, I realized it was a totally different and any nice language I use is wasted, no one is going to look at it in that way.

Many students appreciated it when their teacher marked every grammatical mistake on their essays because they felt that their teacher was trying to help them improve as writers in English, while other students felt very discouraged by a heavily marked paper because they felt like their ideas were being sacrificed for their incorrect grammar. Even if the professor didn’t mark up their sentence level errors, but wrote something like “very good analysis, but check your grammar,” some students often still felt their ideas were being ignored. This only reinforces their assumptions that “good writing” means a mastery of grammar and vocabulary.

One of our main objectives for this research is to create a website that will be a venue for non-native English speakers to hear and share their stories about adapting to the American academy. Not only will the site serve as an exchange forum for non-native writers of English, but it will also allow ESL specialists, faculty and writing center administrators to learn about the complexity of non-native writers' experiences with writing in and for the US academy; it will also allow them to consider ways in which to revise their courses and services in order to accommodate our ever-growing international communities. We want to carve a space for international and immigrant students to share their perspectives without feeling like they are being evaluated in any way. This is why we approached the interviews as an opportunity for them to simply share their story. As we've already noted, our very first questionnaire was rather formal and therefore restrictive. The informants and interviewers felt nervous and consequently the interviews were not as fruitful. Our new approach proved otherwise and we were presented with a wealth of stories that filled in many important gaps that quantitative research would not have accomplished.

Overall, this research has encouraged us to reevaluate our teaching approaches and our writing center policies, especially as they pertain to non-native writers of English. Several of our informants told us, for example, that, although they use the writing center regularly, they are frustrated by the limited number of appointments (ten a semester) they are allowed to make and also by our no-editing policy. As Ting explained, when you have a 20-30 page paper to get through, it's not helpful when the tutor focuses on patterns of errors because, as she says, "[The tutors] find one problem and keep emphasizing that, keep repeating that. They say, I've seen this before, Chinese students tend to have this, blah, blah, blah, and, when they begin to start those kinds of things, it's really wasting my time. And 45 minutes is definitely not enough for our papers."

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At the conclusion of many of our interviews, once the tape recorder was turned off, many of our informants thanked us for listening to their stories and expressed relief that there were those of us out there who were curious to hear their reflections. Would these interviews

make a difference? They asked. Would this allow their teachers to understand? Would it grant them more than ten writing center tutorials per semester?

These questions should reflect that as instructors and administrators, we must move beyond thinking of our non-native students as teaching challenges, but rather, as individuals who have a lot to teach us about our own teaching as it relates to the worlds beyond the US Academy. How do we, as educators in the US Academy, fit into the global picture? Where do the intersections and fissures lie and how can we engage in a larger discussion that isn't isolated in our own classrooms, offices and conferences? How can the wealth of our students' international stories show us ways to take action and help us to move towards a better-integrated university context?

A former writing center peer-tutor and a writing fellow for the Provost, Tonka has the language to talk about language that many of our informants did not have. In the closing quotes, she suggests a balanced way for us to think about the writing of non-native writers that acknowledges our own academic standards without compromising each student's individual experience:

Good writing, first of all, is grammar responsible writing. Well-structured writing as well. Good flow of the thought or argument. And then, having your own voice about it. When you ultimately succeed in writing when you have your own accent, I call it. When you speak to me and hear my accent, it reflects where I come from. Well, I want my writing to be reflected in that way too.

**WE ARE GRATEFUL TO THE FOLLOWING INFORMANTS FOR  
GIVING US THEIR TIME AND THEIR STORIES:**

| <b>INFORMANT</b> | <b>COUNTRY</b>  | <b>LANGUAGE</b>    |
|------------------|-----------------|--------------------|
| Angela           | Greece          | Greek              |
| Anna             | Russia          | Russian            |
| Ayesha           | Pakistan        | Urdu               |
| Cheryl           | Singapore       | Chinese            |
| Diana            | Colombia        | Spanish            |
| Efrata           | Ethiopia/Russia | Amharic/Russian    |
| Haifeng          | China           | Chinese            |
| Hanyan           | China           | Chinese            |
| Ignacio          | Spain           | Spanish            |
| Kanishka         | Sri Lanka       | Sinhalese          |
| Karimatu         | Nigeria         | Hausa              |
| Kumiko           | Japan           | Japanese           |
| Luis H.          | Chile           | Spanish            |
| Luis M.          | Peru            | Spanish            |
| Malak            | Saudi Arabia    | Arabic             |
| Minh             | Vietnam         | Vietnamese/French  |
| Minhee           | S. Korea        | Korean             |
| Monique          | Rwanda          | Kinyarwanda/French |
| Sandarshi        | Sri Lanka       | Sinhalese          |
| Shen-Shyang      | Singapore       | Chinese            |
| Somkuan          | Thailand        | Thai               |
| Sri              | India           | Telugu/Hindi       |
| Ting             | China           | Chinese            |
| Tonka            | Bulgaria        | Bulgarian          |
| Yoon             | S. Korea        | Korean             |
| Ying             | China           | Chinese            |

## SUGGESTED READINGS

(See Works Cited page for full citations)

Worth a close look:

**The Speech Accent Archive.** A George Mason University Linguistics Department website that “uniformly presents a large set of speech samples from a variety of language backgrounds. Native and non-native speakers of English read the same paragraph and are carefully transcribed. The archive is used by people who wish to compare and analyze the accents of different English speakers.” <<http://accent.gmu.edu>>.

**Canagarajah, Suresh A.** “The Place of World Englishes in Composition: Pluralization Continued.” Discusses the need to recognize increasing diversity in writing in our composition classes.

**Flower, Linda.** “Talking across Difference: Intercultural Rhetoric and the Search for Situated Knowledge.” Discusses critical contrastive rhetoric and the search for culturally situated knowledge in an effort to build international understanding.

**Fox, Helen.** *Listening to the World: Cultural Issues in Academic Writing.* Through observations, stories, and interviews with students, Fox seeks to explain why students from non-American cultures have difficulty learning academic writing in U.S. universities.

**Matsuda, Paul Kei.** “The Myth of Linguistic Homogeneity in U.S. College Composition.” Raises the important issue of linguistic homogeneity that is wrongly assumed in college composition classes, and the need to incorporate diverse voices into teaching students in increasingly internationalized universities.

**Reid, Joy M.** *Teaching ESL Writing.* One chapter, in particular, “Pedagogical Issues in ESL Writing,” examines learning style preferences, contrastive rhetoric, including Kaplan’s contrastive rhetoric paragraphs, schema theory, and the writing-reading connection.



**Severino, Carol, et al. Eds. *Writing in Multicultural Settings*.** The twenty essays and four responses in this volume examine racial, ethnic, religious, and other issues in today's composition classrooms. Includes essays by contrastive rhetoric scholars Ulla Connor, Ilona Leki, and more.

**Tucker, Amy. *Decoding ESL: International Students in the American College Classroom*.** Uses contrastive rhetoric research to study ESL students experiences with academic English, from grammar usage to approaches to literature.

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At our institution, identified as the most diverse institution in the nation, “contrastive rhetoric” is not an abstract communication theory but an everyday instructional reality. In this publication, Writing Center researchers describe their efforts to better understand this reality through an HSRB-approved research project for which they gathered stories from students from varied cultural and linguistic backgrounds in order to discover how these students recreate their identities as writers in the US academy. Framed by the scholarship on language acquisition, ESL pedagogy, and ethnographic theory, the research data includes students’ responses to interview questions about learning to write in their native language and in English, the differences they perceive between writing in both, and where they feel the cultural disconnects. This publication shares the challenges non-native students face adapting to US academic writing, including struggles with interpreting assignments and teachers’ comments and their anxieties over grammar and syntax. Along with the stories of these students, two members of the research team, both non-native writers, share their own experiences. The issue concludes with a section that discusses the implications for teaching and future plans for a website to present both the students’ stories and their voices.